Were Men Sent To Kill Castro Turned On JFK?

Pittsburgh Press 3/24/77

By JACK ANDERSON
And LES WHITTEN

WASHINGTON — One of the most feared mobsters in the underworld is Florida's Mafia chieftain, Santo Trafficante.

House investigators approached his Miami hideaway, therefore, with some apprehension.

He appeared at the screen door to accept their subpoena. "Shove it under the door," he said softly. They peered through the screen. The sinister Trafficante was pale, and his hands were shaking.

He may have had reason to quake. The House Assassinations Committee had taken a sudden interest in the murder last July of mobster John Rosselli.

Before he died, Rosselli hinted he knew who had arranged President John

Washington Merry-Go-Round

F. Kennedy's assassination. Carefully hedging, he told an incredible story that implicated Trafficante.

(Trafficante last week refused to answer questions before the House Assassinations Committee, invoking the Fifth Admendment.)

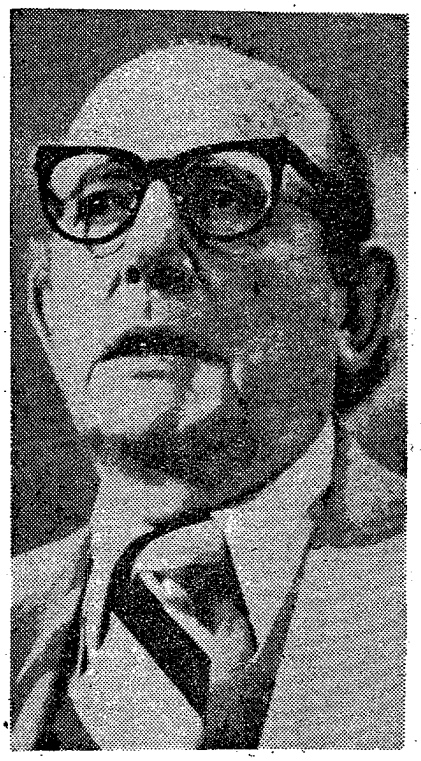
The New York Times had reported on the front page that Rosselli was murdered as a "direct result" of his Senate testimony about the Kennedy assassination.

Twelve days before his death, Rosselli dined with Trafficante at the Landings Restaurant in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla. It is often the custom of the Mafia to wine and dine a wayward member before he is executed.

According to the New York Times, Rosselli was lured aboard a private boat by his executioners July 28. It is also the Mafia practice to assign the murder contract to friends whom the victim trusts.

The Times reported that Rosselli settled down to a glass of vodka with two gangland associates. One unobtrusively slipped behind him and held a powerful hand over Rosselli's nose and mouth.

The 70-year-old Rosselli, who had emphysema, was easily strangled. Then the murderers sawed off his legs so the body would fit in a metal drum.



SANTO TRAFFICANTE
Implicated by silenced mobster.

They cut holes in the drum so it would fill with water. As an added precaution, they weighted the drum with heavy iron chains. Rosselli should have disappeared forever on the bottom of Biscayne Bay.

But apparently the gases from his body caused the container to rise eerily from its salt-water grave. The drum, with its grisly contents, washed ashore where it was found by fishermen.

The gangland execution raised some nagging questions in the minds of the committee's homicide experts.

Why would the Mafia knock off a retired racketeer? The fact that he had appeared before the Senate normally would have deterred the crime lords. They would rather not risk antagonizing the federal government by murdering a celebrated witness unless there was some compelling reason.

The experts doubted the Mafia was upset over Rosselli's confession that, as a hit man for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), he had attempted to assassinate Cuban Premier Fidel Castro. The mobsters hated Castro, who had expropriated their casinos in Havana.

We furnished the committee with a more likely motive for the murder. We got the story from Rosselli himself, bit by bit, over the past six years. He had come to trust us during our investigation of the CIA plot to kill Castro. Whenever Rosselli was in Washington, he dropped by.

The CIA had figured the Havana underworld must have killers who could eliminate Castro. The CIA, therefore, spoke secretly to billionaire Howard Hughes' chief honcho in Las Vegas, Robert Maheu, about the project. Maheu recruited Rosselli, then the Chicago mob's representative in Las Vegas.

Rosselli looked upon the assassination mission as an opportunity to gain favor with the U. S. government. But he lacked the stature to deal with Santo Trafficante, who controlled the Havana underworld.

Rosselli enlisted his own superior, Chicago godfather Sam Giancana, to approach Trafficante.

Then, with Trafficante's blessing, Rosselli used the Havana underworld to plot Castro's demise.

The assassination squad tried to plant poison pills, supplied by the CIA, in Castro's food. Castro became ill but didn't die, then, underworld snipers were dispatched to a Havana rooftop but they were caught.

Rosselli told us the rest of the story as his own "speculation."

Rosselli heard that Castro had tortured the would-be assassins and learned about the plot on his life.

It would be the sort of irony that Latin-Americans appreciate, Rosselli suggested, for Castro to use the same plotters to retaliate against the U. S. president.

According to Rosselli's speculation, Castro may have used these underworld elements, most of them Cubans from the old Trafficante organization, to arrange the assassination of Kennedy.

They may have lined up Lee Harvey Oswald as the assassin or may have used him as a decoy while others ambushed Kennedy from closer range.

Once Oswald was captured, the plotters couldn't afford to let him reveal his connection with the underworld. So Rosselli speculated that Jack Ruby, a small-time hoodlum with ties to the Havana underworld, was ordered to eliminate Oswald.

This sort of "speculation" might have induced the mob to silence Rosselli.